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ABSTRACT

It is argued that many teachers of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), in attempting to help students deal with the complex task of developing cohesion in their writing, focus on use of functional connectives such as conjunctions while overlooking use of content lexical ties (such as synonymy and hyponymy) despite their usefulness in first-language writing. The various types and use of content lexical ties are reviewed, and examples of ESL student writing are used to illustrate that the lack of content lexical ties is often compounded by misuse of connectives. Exercises are then introduced to help students use content lexical ties to improve both cohesion and overall quality in their writing. (Contains 14 references.) (MSE)

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The Use of Content Lexical Ties in Writing Cohesion: Its Importance and Instruction in ESOL

Abstract:

How to help ESOL students overcome the plaguing problem of lack of cohesion in writing has long been a challenge. Yet many instructors in dealing with this complex task continue to focus mostly on teaching the use of functional connectives such as conjunctions. They overlook the use of content lexical ties such as synonymy and hyponymy despite the fact that researches have found that cohesion in L1 writing rests to a great extent on the use of such ties. After a brief discussion of the various types and the use of content lexical ties, the article presents examples of ESOL students' writing to show that incoherence in ESOL often does not come from a lack of connective words, but from an absence of content lexical ties, a problem frequently compounded by misused connectives. It then introduces exercises that will help students learn to use content lexical ties to improve the cohesion and overall quality of their writing.

Introduction

Lack of cohesion in writing is a problem that plagues many ESOL students. How to help the students overcome the problem has long been a challenge to ESOL teachers and researchers alike. Yet in dealing with this complex task, many teachers continue to focus mostly on teaching the use of functional connectives such as conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs, overlooking another important element responsible for basic text cohesion: content lexical ties. Many studies have shown that these ties, which

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involve the use of repetition, synonymy/antonymy, and superordinate/hyponymy among others, are an essential cohesive device in native speakers' speeches and writing (Carter and McCarthy 1988: 201-220; Halliday and Hasan 1976; Halliday 1994: 330-337; McCarthy 1991: 64-87; Salkie 1995; Winter 1977 and 1978).[1] Unfortunately, the findings of the studies seem to have failed to produce much impact on ESOL writing instruction on cohesion, for the author's search has yielded no direct studies on the teaching and the use of content lexical ties in ESOL, and most ESOL writing textbooks have either totally neglected or merely mentioned the subject in passing.

Spencer and Arbon (1996) and Swales and Feak (1994), for example, discussed only functional connectives in addressing the issue of cohesion in their composition books. Reid (1988), while rendering a four-page detailed discussion on connectives, offered only a less-than-one-page sketch on repetition and synonyms as cohesive devices. Similarly, Ruetten (1997) has merely a short unit on using repetitions for cohesion while presenting in almost every chapter a unit on using functional connectives. More importantly, neither Reid nor Ruetten mentioned superordinate /hyponymy as viable cohesive devices. Only Hamp-Lyons and Heasley (1987) include units like 'Class relationship: Classification' and 'Class relationship: Definition' on how to use superordinates/hyponyms in writing. No authors seem to have touched on the use of content text structuring words (a term I will explain below) for cohesion. This ostensible overlook of content lexical ties in ESOL writing textbooks might partially explain classroom teachers' failure to address the cohesion issue from this important perspective.

Types of content lexical ties

Before further discussion of the significance of teaching content lexical ties in ESOL writing, a brief review of lexical cohesion is in order. Lexical cohesion refers to the coherence of a text formed by the use of repetition, synonyms, antonyms, superordinates/hyponyms, 'related words' (Salkie 1995: 28-31), and/or 'text-structuring' words (Carter and McCarthy 1988: 206-210; Winter 1977 and 1978). For better clarification, these lexical items used for cohesion are organized into the following four groups.

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Repetition Synonyms Antonyms	Superordinates/ hyponyms	Related words	Text-structuring words

Since repetition, synonyms, or antonyms are well-known terms, their use for forming text cohesion should be easy to understand. Superordinate/hyponyms, related words and text-structuring words are, however, much less familiar nomenclature. Some explanation is necessary.

Superordinates are general words that refer to a class whereas hyponyms are specific members of the class. 'Animal', for example, is a superordinate whose hyponyms include words like 'dog', 'cat', and 'chicken'. Depending on the context, the writer may go from a superordinate to its hyponyms or vice versa to create text coherence as will be shown in the example below. "Related words" refer to those that are normally not considered synonyms or antonyms but they form a synonymic, antonymic, or superordinate/hyponym relationship in the context (Carter and McCarthy 1988: 204-205; Salkie 1995: 27-31). They are

'situational' or 'textual' synonyms or antonyms. The vocabulary choice in the following quotation from Gibbs' (1990:13) article about the extreme optimism of today's youth will exemplify both concepts.

> Wild optimism is youth's prerogative, but older women should shudder slightly at the giddy expectations of today's high school and college students. At times their hope borders on hubris with its assumption that the secrets that eluded their predecessors will be revealed to them. "In the 1950s women were family-oriented," says Sheryl Hatch, 20, a broadcasting major at the American University in Washington. "In the 70s they were career-oriented. In the 90s we want to balance. I think I can do both."

First, the word 'youth' and the phrase 'high school and college students' form a superordinate/hyponym relationship in which 'youth' is a superordinate to 'high school and college students'. As for 'related words', there are many in this short passage. 'Youth' versus 'older', and 'family-oriented' versus 'career-oriented' are obvious examples, and they may be considered either as antonyms or situational antonyms. 'Wild optimism', 'giddy expectations', 'hope', and 'hubris' refer basically to the same thing although they are not usually considered synonyms. They are situational synonyms. The words 'eluded' and 'revealed' would not normally be considered related. Yet in the sentence, they form a contrasting relationship.

Text-structuring words, also known as 'halfway-house' words, are those that fall somewhere between what have been traditionally called content and functional words (Carter and McCarthy 1988: 206-208; also see Winter, 1977). These words such

as 'agenda', '(dis)advantage', 'problem', 'reason', and 'feasible' may on the surface be classified as content words in the traditional sense because they are nouns, adjectives, or verbs. But when we encounter these words in reading, often 'we need to do something similar to what we do when we encounter words like *it, he* and *do* in texts: we either refer to the bank of knowledge built up with the author, look back in the text to find a suitable referent, or forward, anticipating that the writer will supply the missing content' (Carter and McCarthy 1988: 206-207). Take the following sentence as an example. 'Despite its many good features, this car has a shortcoming'. Both the words 'features' and 'shortcoming' fall into the category of text structuring words because the reader has to go back to the previous sentences to really understand what the 'good features' mean, and to wait for an explanation about the shortcoming before he/she knows what it is. In other words, both words have to be lexicalized before they make full sense.

Examples of lack of content lexical ties in ESOL writing

Lack of cohesion in ESOL students' writing results from many factors such as incoherent ideas and misuse or insufficient use of functional connectives. Yet as stated earlier, ESOL educators tend to overlook deficient use of content lexical ties as a cause of lack of cohesion in the students' writing. In fact, often our students' lack of cohesion does not result from an absence of connective words, but from a want of content lexical ties. Furthermore, the lack or misuse of functional connectives is frequently compounded by a want of content lexical ties. Deficient content lexical ties in ESOL students' writing, like

other problems that cause incoherence, often leads to confusion or misunderstanding. The following are a few examples from my students' writing that will help illustrate the problem at different levels.

Example 1.

> Because of ethnocentrism, the [American] students seem to exclude the other race of students [students of other races]. Most international students studying in high school[s], always feel very sad because they can't make American friends. One of the result[s] is American students' personalities [are] always cold. The other result is that people [who] speak different languages cannot communicate well.

The last two sentences are confusing because the word "results," as we know it from the context, does not seem right. The word "causes" would make much more sense according to the context. So the confusion here arises from a lack of content lexical cohesive ties, not from an absence of connective words, for the student did use--very correctly I would like to add--two such words, 'one' and 'the other'. The problem illustrated here is rather simple because it results from the student's confusion over two rather basic words: 'cause' and 'result'. Problems like this, though usually easy to correct, are not uncommon with low level students, and they suggest a need for more fundamental training in vocabulary, especially in terms of word semantics in context and word collocations.

Example 2.

> *Interchange* is published by [the] Cambridge University Press. Different companies publish different programs.

> Each program differs in its foundations, sequences of strategies, and instructional content; therefore, the weakness of these books is that the vocabulary and content are controlled by [the] publisher.

There are two questionable words in this passage: 'program' and 'therefore'. The word 'program' usually refers to an outline or an order of a conference or performance, and it may also mean a curriculum, but it is never used to refer to books. Publishing companies normally do not publish programs either. By using 'program', rather than the correct word 'series', to refer to *Interchange* and other series textbooks like it, the author failed to provide an important lexical cohesive tie, thus causing bafflement to the reader. The word 'therefore' is an incorrect conjunctive adverb connector since the context and logic do not warrant a true cause-effect relationship between the two adjacent sentences, i.e. the fact that each publishing company has its own preferences in, among other things, textbook style and content area does not necessarily constitute a weakness. Instead, such preferences may, in fact, help the company build up its strengths. The problems here are more complex than the one in the previous example. For one thing, the difference between 'series' and 'program' (i.e. the practice of calling sequenced related books a 'series' not a 'program') is more difficult for ESOL students to grasp than that between 'cause' and 'result'. In addition, whether there is a cause/effect relationship here appears less clear than in the previous example. As these problems are more difficult for ESOL students to detect, they tend to be of a higher level of difficulty and are likely to bother not only low level students but also many intermediate

students.

Example 3.

> Preschool education is a tremendous advantage for any child before entering a formal classroom environment. However, the home environment of children from birth to five years is the most essential element. Very early in life, children learn how important language is as they communicate with their parents. Even at an early age, children display knowledge of written words. . .

The first problematic word is 'advantage'. As stated earlier, words like 'advantage', 'announcement', 'problem' function as 'a half-way house' between functional and content words and need to be lexicalized with the necessary information before they can make sense. In this example, follow-up explanations are needed for the word 'advantage', i.e., in what sense is preschool education a 'tremendous advantage'. The other problematic word is the contrastive connector 'however' since the two adjacent sentences do not form a contrast. Finally, the author fails to lexicalize the phrase 'essential element', a text structuring phrase that should have been followed by an explanation regarding in what sense and for what exactly the environment is essential. Instead, the author simply goes on to discuss what young children can do at home. Compared with those in the previous examples, the problems here are probably most difficult to explain and remedy as they require an understanding of larger and higher discourse structure and call for substantial changes and additions to the text. Even advanced ESOL students often struggle with problems of this nature.

Exercises for understanding and using content lexical ties

To help my students overcome the above problems, I have designed and used a series of exercises on content lexical ties. These exercises have proved helpful. Based on my observation and students' feedback, they not only increased students' vocabulary but also helped them understand better the vocabulary being studied, because the exercises often enabled students to learn the words in context or in relation to one another either as synonyms, antonyms, superordinates, or hyponyms. Second, a better understanding of these words, in turn, allowed students to use the words to provide better cohesion in their writing, hence enhancing their writing skills. The exercises are organized here into three major types: 1) finding synonyms, antonyms, superordinates, and hyponyms, or classifying words into these categories, 2) identifying content lexical ties or the lack of them in writing, and 3) creating lexical cohesive ties. Although these exercises can be conducted individually, pair or group work is preferable.

Finding/classifying synonyms, antonyms, etc.

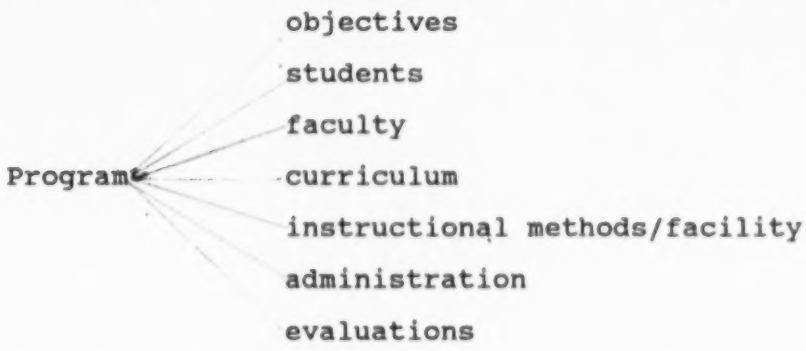
'Finding synonyms, antonyms, etc'. is a type of exercise that does not require complex preparation on the part of the teacher. The teacher may simply give a word for the students to find its synonyms or antonyms, or may give a superordinate for them to find its hyponyms, or, reversely, the teacher may give the students a series of hyponyms and have them determine its superordinate. Classifying words is also an easy-to-construct exercise. The teacher may give students a fairly large number of words (either all known words or some known and some new words),

and have them use various diagrams to classify and arrange the words either as synonyms, antonyms, or superordinates/hyponyms. The teacher may or may not allow the students to consult dictionaries in completing the exercise. Here are a few examples of identification and classification exercises.

Example 1: Find the superordinate for the following words:

Exercises, term paper, book report, composition, research project, lab work, reading, etc. (**school assignments or school work**)

Example 2: Find the (situational) hyponyms (i.e. related words) for the word 'program' (a teaching or learning program)



Example 3: Classify the following words into synonyms/antonyms:

difficult, straightforward, obvious, puzzling, perplexing, clear, confusing, bewildering, simple, hard, easy, lucid enigmatic.

Identifying content lexical ties (including text-structuring words) or the lack of them in writing.

Students here either identify content lexical cohesive ties in written passages (maybe as short as one or two sentences) or determine the lack of such ties in writing (the best examples may come from your students' writing). Such exercises call for, on

the part of the students, not only a very close reading of the passage but also some familiarity with the various types of lexical cohesive ties. This exercise may be best conducted during students' peer critique in writing where you can have students, as one critique task, identify the use of or the lack of content lexical ties in each other's paper, discuss, and make suggestions for improvement.

Creating lexical cohesive ties

This type of exercises helps students directly to develop the ability to create or use content lexical cohesive ties in their writing. It can be carried out in a variety of forms tailored for students at different levels. Here are a few examples.

Example 1: Using superordinates and hyponyms: Give students a picture or a series of pictures and have them provide a coherent description of what they see. For example, for a beginning level class, we can show them a picture of a living room. Then the students can give a depiction by starting with the superordinate 'furniture' and move on to its hyponyms like a sofa, chairs, a coffee table, and an entertainment center. For a more advanced class, we can give them a picture/diagram about the White House, Capitol Hill, the Supreme Court, and have them describe the American Government. In both examples, students have to come up with appropriate content lexical items that may serve as cohesive devices for their description.

Example 2: Using synonyms/antonyms/repetitions: Ask students to write a short paragraph or essay in which they will have to create or strengthen its cohesion by using the lexical items in

questions. For example, write an essay on 'Troubles in English' in which the students will have to use a series of synonyms for the word 'trouble' such as 'difficulty', 'problem', and 'headache'. This activity is most appropriate for intermediate students.

Example 3: Using text-structuring words: 1) Give students a lead sentence which contains a text-structuring word, and have them lexicalize the word. For example: 'John had a good *reason* not to attend the meeting. . .'. 2) Have students write a passage in which they will have to use and lexicalize one or two text structuring words provided for them such as 'merit', 'idea', 'convincing'. This activity is good almost for all levels of students.

It is necessary, I believe, to point out here that although all the above exercises have been used with my students (college ESOL students) and proven rather helpful to them, the activities may not always be useful for all students and for all settings. Some adaptations and revisions are needed to make them work well for different students in different contexts. And I have no doubt new and more innovative activities will be developed as ESOL educators pay more attention to lexical cohesion in writing.

Conclusion

It has been demonstrated that content lexical ties are an important cohesive device in writing, and deficient use of lexical cohesive ties by ESOL students has proven to be an important cause for the lack of cohesion in their writing. Yet ESOL educators seem so far to have overlooked the issue. More attention should be paid to the question both in research and

classroom teaching. Some exercises that the author used in tackling the problem have been presented. These exercises aim to help students 1) to develop a better understanding of these cohesive ties and 2) to create and use such ties in their writing. Many more teaching and learning activities in this area need to be developed and explored to help ESOL students enhance their competence in writing cohesion.

Notes

1. Carrell (1982) raised questions about this school of thought led by Halliday and Hasan, especially their text cohesion theory. Drawing on the schema theory about text processing as an interactive process, she argues that cohesion is not coherence because the latter involves not only the writer but also the reader. Yet in the end she concedes that cohesion studies are of value and that 'we should teach our ESL students the cohesive ties available in English' (486). While I appreciate Carrell's comments about the complexity of the coherence issue and about the role of the reader in achieving a text coherence, her argument seems to put the cart before the horse by missing the priority of the issue. If a text does not have cohesion in the first place, coherence of the text would be very hard to attain if not totally impossible, no matter how good the reader may be. Another point that should be stressed here is that content lexical ties, though important, are just one of the many devices and issues in text cohesion. Helping students learn to use these ties alone will not solve all their problems in writing cohesion.

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